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ABSTRACT

In view of the national attention that has recently been brought to public school improvement, a list of suggestions is presented in the form of leading questions to guide communities in assessing the quality of their local schools and in promoting beneficial change. The evaluative questions touch on a wide range of issues: school financing (percent of budget spent on teachers' salaries); comparative results of standardized tests; success of graduates; effectiveness of leadership (school boards and superintendents); and condition of facilities. Other questions are prescriptive, concerning school-community interaction, aid to teachers, curriculum development, special interests, and essential priorities. Because of the necessarily slow process of change in public schools, patience, trust, and diligence are needed above all in any effort to cultivate a fulfilling and productive relationship between a school and its community. (TE)

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THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ACTION IN IMPROVING SCHOOLS

Helen C. Lee

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THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ACTION IN IMPROVING SCHOOLS

A flurry of studies and a cacaphony of noisy debate draw attention to the need for change in schools and schooling. Amid this clamor of voices, community action groups can seize the moment of interest to foster positive change. Of all tools for improving education, action of the public is the most powerful.

Four recent reports have riveted attention upon problems. Because of its escalated rhetoric, "A Nation at Risk" has drawn the most comment. It calls for demanding more from students and their teachers. But it is silent upon how this demand is to be funded or managed. The study by the Twentieth Century Fund specifies an abundance of financial support for certain subject matter teaching---English and science. Perhaps the most credible of the reports---the Goodlad eight-year study of one thousand classrooms---calls for more money for teachers but requires and describes better and more diverse methods of teaching, and more emphasis on problem-solving than on accumulation of knowledge. Goodlad also points out that retention, promotion, and increased salaries for teachers should rest on a more reliable base than seniority. The Boyer Commission concentrated its recommendations on the high school---pointing to the need for more academic education, better working conditions, and more rewards for math and science teachers.

The problem in accepting all these recommendations

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is that evidence is not strong enough to prove that implementation of them would really improve education. In each case, the report seems to respond more to the preconceived biases of the investigators than to situations revealed by the investigation.

But repeated evidence does support certain concerns. As many as one-third of the math and science teachers now employed are teaching without regular certification. Math scores on standardized tests of high school students have fallen. A smaller percentage of high school students than formerly take courses in math and science. Children spend twice as much time before the television screen as they spend in the classroom. Viewing violence on the screen is associated with an increase in aggressive behavior. Where does community action begin to solve these problems? And what directions does it follow?

It begins at the grass roots with you and me, right where we are, right now. Let's look carefully at our own schools, assess their actual, visible needs, and react to opportunities presented. Do media descriptions apply to your schools, or are your schols different?

Let's find out how our schools are financed. What percentage of local taxes go to support schools? Of state taxes? Of federal taxes? How is the money spent? What percentage goes to teacher salaries? The way to determine this is to sum up all money spent

on teacher salaries and subtract that sum from total school expenditures. We need to go to tax hearings and listen to what is said about cuts in tax support of various programs.

Let's look at standardized testing in our school system. It will not tell us all we want to know, but it tells us things we need to know and cannot find out from other sources. We need to compare our test results with those in communities similar to our own in size, demographic composition, in location, in socio-economic factors, in per pupil cost, and in assessed evaluation. We need to ascertain whether our students approximate or exceed norms in standard categories such as math and language. Standardized testing helps us discover hidden talent. Academic problems of individual children can be diagnosed, individual progress can be monitored, parents may be counseled, and remediation or special opportunities provided.

Do our graduates enter and succeed in a wide range of post-secondary experiences, both academic and vocational? Are buildings modern, carefully tended, with facilities appropriate to programs we want? Is the educational climate calm and positive? Are teachers, students, parents, administrators, and citizens comfortable with participating---or not participating if that is their choice---in the life of the school, feeling pretty sure that schools are going along pretty well?

Are school personnel alert to improve schools? Are new and promising ideas tried out on a small scale in pilot projects, carefully evaluated, and incorporated into general procedures if they prove effective? Are there continual staff development activities in your schools? And do these include activities for parents and community? Are there lots of parent involvement programs, with parents and citizens acting on councils and as volunteers in many inventive ways?

Do schools mirror and interact with the community? Do all children have an opportunity to work and play with those both alike and different from themselves in age, sex, race, handicaps, socio-cultural or other backgrounds? Do our schools offer appropriate cultural opportunities in the visual and performing arts, so that children may learn to enjoy acting as both producers and spectators? Is there attention health education, manifested in such areas as nutrition, sex education, and lifelong sports?

Let's review the leadership in our schools. Is our school board balanced racially? Are there more men than women? Are members interested in all children, not advocates of any one group? Are they listeners, hard-working, patient, open, inquisitive, curious, eager learners, modest, wise, temperate, and steady? Are superintendents long-term employees, with time to develop community contacts and consistent programs and personnel policies? Have we made a commitment to help

develop our leaders and help them grow?

Do we respect our professionals? We cannot teach classes and administer schools, and we need to support those who do. Do we good-mouth, not bad-mouth schools? Are we quick to recognize what is good? Lay persons should be making decisions about what the objectives of schooling should be---what students should know and be expected to be and do. But professionals should be allowed to decide how the job is to get done. Lay persons then should hold the professional responsible for getting results. Products, not processes should be evaluated.

The stance of the lay community advisor should be consultative---avoiding demands and protests. Professionals should operate free of under fear, which is an invitation to them to try and manipulate or get the community quiet rather than to respect your viewpoint and improve their performance.

Are we reasonable about expecting results? New programs take time to produce gains. We need to learn how to ask questions and understand answers we get. We need to study a matter before we take positions. We need to know and state precisely what we want---what should happen, to whom, and with what results.

We need to control the effects of special interest groups, people who attack any plan that endangers their biases, who promote pet nostrums, who start with answers and work back to questions, who base data on

conclusions. No matter how good the cause or how virtuous the arguments, such people have the issue wrong. The real issue is the academic growth of children. They have a right to be heard and have the validity of their evidence examined, but they have no right to impose a minority viewpoint on the majority.

Let's do something practical to help teachers---those whose activities most directly affect the children. Here are some areas for examination---teacher education, teacher selection, teacher testing, teacher salaries, teacher evaluation, teacher inservice training, teacher supervision, teacher working conditions, and teacher unions.

Let's look at curriculum. What should children be taught---what is basic? What value has a liberal education---the subjects designed to produce a wise person who makes wise choices---in a technological society? How shall we prepare the student for the world of work? What part of education should serve national goals rather than personal fulfillment?

Let's be willing to confront some dangerous thoughts. How much education do we want to fund? Has quality education become quantity education---everything for everybody? How much free education should there be? For whom? Are special children---the gifted and the handicapped---entitled to an education that costs twice as much tax money as educating other children? Has desegregation accomplished what we want

it to do? Should expensively operated small schools be closed?

Let's look at some myth-destroying research. The best research is now examining, not the reasons for failures but for successes in education. New research indicates that changes in student behavior are produced most effectively by neither reward nor punishment but by modeling. Any kind of parent involvement in schools produces improved academic performance. Children from grades one through five are improving their test scores in reading. Children are improving in their mastery of basic math operations; their growing weakness is in problem-solving. Children get most of their pills, cigarette-addiction, and alcohol at home. No shred of evidence exists that study of traditional grammar improves student writing. Such study keeps us from insisting that schools do more of what is already accomplishing little.

Let's try some little things rather than sweeping changes. Start changes with pilot programs, small and, perhaps, unglamorous. Evaluate them carefully. Enlarge them slowly. Be independent, if you can, of large funding and cutesy acronyms.

Here are some places to start. Give sociology credit for student community service. Use local studies for credit in government. Form community counsils to discover resources for schools. Cultivate business-school cooperation. Raise scholarships for math and

science students who may become teachers. Support money bills and bond issues for schools. Have state contests in science and math. Foster university-school system cooperation. Sponsor some inservice programs for teachers. Visit your state department of education and ask what programs are available for your community. Sponsor a retired teacher or young mother volunteer, who may need financial support for their volunteer activities.

Above all, let's be patient with both ourselves and others when we engage in change. Let us be sure of where we can start---where we always start in a situation where human beings are concerned---with trust in each other's good intentions and willingness to recognize and enjoy all the good things that happen, with the greatest charity and patience for everyone involved, even when good is delayed. Our cause is worth it---nothing less than human kind's ticket to tomorrow.